

Seeking to undermine democracy and partnerships

How the CCP is influencing the Pacific islands information environment

Blake Johnson and Joshua Dunne



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Blake Johnson and Joshua Dunne

Policy Brief
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What's the problem?

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is conducting coordinated information operations in Pacific island countries (PICs). Those operations are designed to influence political elites, public discourse and political sentiment regarding existing partnerships with Western democracies. Our research shows how the CCP frequently seeks to capitalise on regional events, announcements and engagements to push its own narratives, many of which are aimed at undermining some of the region's key partnerships.

This report examines three significant events and developments:

- the establishment of AUKUS in 2021
- the CCP's recent efforts to sign a region-wide security agreement
- the 2022 Pacific Islands Forum held in Fiji.

This research, including these three case studies, shows how the CCP uses tailored, reactive messaging in response to regional events and analyses the effectiveness of that messaging in shifting public discourse online.

This report also highlights a series of information channels used by the CCP to push narratives in support of the party's regional objectives in the Pacific. Those information channels include Chinese state media, CCP publications and statements in local media, and publications by local journalists connected to CCP-linked groups.¹

There's growing recognition of the information operations and misinformation and disinformation being spread globally under the CCP's directives. Although the CCP's information operations have had little demonstrated effectiveness in shifting online public sentiment in the case studies examined in this report, they've previously proven to be effective in influencing public discourse and political elites in the Pacific.² Analysing the long-term impact of these operations, so that informed policy decisions can be made by governments and by social media platforms, requires greater measurement and understanding of current operations and local sentiment.

What's the solution?

The CCP's presence in the information environment is expanding across the Pacific through online and social media platforms, local and China-based training opportunities, and greater television and short-wave radio programming.³ However, the impact of this growing footprint in the information environment remains largely unexplored and unaddressed by policymakers in the Pacific and in the partner countries that are frequently targeted by the CCP's information operations.

Pacific partners, including Australia, the US, New Zealand, Japan, the UK and the European Union, need to enhance partnerships with Pacific island media outlets and online news forum managers in order to build a stronger, more resilient media industry that will be less vulnerable to disinformation and pressures exerted by the CCP. This includes further assistance in hiring, training and retaining high-quality professional journalists and media executives and providing financial support without conditions to uphold media freedom in the Pacific. Training should be offered to support online



discussion forum managers sharing news content to counter the spread of disinformation and misinformation in public online groups. The data analysis in this report highlights a need for policymakers and platforms to invest more resources in countering CCP information operations in Melanesia, which is shown to have greater susceptibility to those operations.

As part of their targeted training package, Pacific island media and security institutions, such as the Pacific Fusion Centre, should receive further training on identifying disinformation and coordinated information operations to help build media resiliency. For that training to be effective, governments should fund additional research into the actors and activities affecting the Pacific islands information environment, including climate-change and election disinformation and misinformation, and foreign influence activities.

Information sharing among PICs' media institutions would build greater regional understanding of CCP influence in the information environment and other online harms and malign activity. ASPI has also previously proposed that an Indo-Pacific hybrid threats centre would help regional governments, businesses and civil society better understand and counter those threats.⁴

Pacific partners, particularly Australia and the US, need to be more effective and transparent in communicating how aid delivered to the region is benefiting PICs and building people-to-people links. Locally based diplomats need to work more closely with Pacific media to contextualise information from press releases and statements and give PIC audiences a better understanding of the benefits delivered by Western governments' assistance. This includes greater transparency on the provision of aid in the region. Doing so will debunk some of the CCP's narratives regarding Western support and legitimacy in the region.

Key findings

- Following the September 2021 *AUKUS announcement*, the CCP attempted to spread a narrative critical of the establishment of AUKUS, but those efforts failed to generate anti-Western sentiment. In fact, Pacific commentary shifted towards greater anti-China and pro-Western sentiment following the CCP's efforts to influence regional discourse regarding AUKUS.
- After the CCP's efforts to reach a *regional security agreement* (which began early 2022), attempts by party-state media and embassy officials to criticise Western and local concerns had little impact on people's online sentiment. Although CCP officials were active in making media statements about the proposed agreement, those activities resulted in a greater proportion of negative responses online compared to statements made by local PIC officials and journalists.
- The CCP's efforts to frame the US and Australia as colonialist and belligerent in the wake of the *Pacific Islands Forum* in July 2022 also had little penetration into local reporting of the forum.
- Similarly to what was observed in ASPI's October 2022 report, *Suppressing the truth and spreading lies: how the CCP is influencing Solomon Islands' information environment*,⁵ CCP official-led articles in local media generated greater engagement online than did articles in party-state media. However, comments by CCP officials in local media addressing these issues were far less frequent than observed in the Solomon Islands case studies examined in that ASPI report.

- Our research analysed Facebook commentary on posts related to each of the case studies in local Pacific media, CCP party-state media, Chinese embassy pages and local discussion groups. The ratio of positive to negative comments about the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the West remained relatively consistent in all three case studies. Commentary about the West remained relatively balanced, while there were from 2.8 to 4 times more negative comments about China than positive ones.
- Analysing Facebook commentary across subregions of the Pacific showed greater ratios of negative commentary about the PRC in Polynesia compared to Melanesia. Polynesia had eight times as many negative comments towards China compared to positive comments, and Melanesia only twice as many.
- Members of several PRC–PIC friendship associations, which are linked to the CCP's united front system, were also found to be publishing CCP-aligned content in Pacific media and contributing to party-state media articles. We found that, so far, those few articles have had little penetration and impact in the Pacific islands online information environment. However, this is an emerging avenue of influence for the CCP that should continue to be monitored.

Introduction

In the Pacific islands, the CCP wants to create a region that depends on China economically, supports it diplomatically—including through recognition of the 'One China' policy—and reflexively defers to its interests at the expense of relationships with other foreign partners. With China's growing footprint comes an increased potential for the CCP to interfere in domestic politics and the region's other foreign partnerships, in addition to efforts to influence political elites and populations and shape public discourse on new developments and events. The CCP is attempting to expand its presence across the Pacific in order to achieve those objectives, including in the media and information environment through the promotion of particular narratives and disinformation on certain topics.

The promotion of those narratives through information operations, including the use of disinformation, is a tactic to support the party's broader objective globally—including now in the Pacific islands as the CCP's footprint and interests in the region expand. The aim is to create a region that reflexively defers to the CCP's interests at the expense of other partnerships—by undermining the relationships between PICs and their other foreign partners while telling 'the China story well'.⁶

ASPI's October 2022 investigation into the CCP's role and influence during the November 2021 Honiara riots and the leaked March 2022 China – Solomon Islands security agreement revealed the CCP's efforts to conduct information operations.⁷ As outlined in that report, those information operations were designed to deceive the local population regarding the instigation of the riots and to sway popular opinion against supporting partnerships with Australia and the US.

The data collected in this project doesn't provide an exhaustive record of all regional CCP influence activities online and in the media but it does show growing CCP coordination of a range of Pacific-wide activities.



This research, including the three case studies described in more detail below, fills a knowledge gap by creating a baseline understanding and characterisation of how CCP regional information operations are unfolding in the PICs. We analyse which information channels those operations are focused on in traditional and online media, and the effect of the CCP's narratives on local people's sentiment as expressed online. This baselining of CCP influence, activity and effectiveness provides a means of accurately detecting shifts over time that could indicate increased effort or effectiveness of such information operations as they continue to be deployed.

Methodology

This report highlights a series of information channels used by the CCP to push narratives in support of the party's regional objectives in the Pacific. Three primary case studies are used to highlight tailored, reactive messages in response to regional events and their effectiveness in shifting public discourse online.

- Case study 1 (referred to as 'AUKUS reactions') examines the CCP's attempts to influence how Pacific island leaders and people responded to the announcement of the AUKUS partnership by Australia, the US and the UK. Data collection occurred from 13 September 2021 to 15 November 2021.
- Case study 2 (referred to as 'the regional agreement') examines the CCP's attempt to secure a regional security agreement with 10 PICs. It also includes reporting on Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's tour of the Pacific region. Data collection occurred from 22 May 2022 to 12 June 2022.
- Case study 3 (referred to as 'the Pacific Islands Forum' or 'PIF') examines the CCP's attempt to influence PIC leaders and populations in response to announcements and events involved in the Pacific Islands Forum Summit in Suva. Data collection occurred from 4 July 2022 to 18 July 2022.

The length of these case studies is determined by the prominence of these issues in Pacific media and resource constraints that inhibited continuous collection.

When we analysed the impact of identified PIC individuals associated with groups linked to the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD)—such as China–PIC friendship associations or Confucius institutes—we extended the collection period to begin at the earliest identifiable CCP-aligned contribution from the PIC individual to party-state media in 2019.

The analytical methods used included quantitative analysis of publicly available data from a range of sources, including articles from local Pacific and Chinese state media outlets and associated Facebook posts from those media outlets. This data was collected systematically and supplemented *ad hoc* with additional Facebook posts from local PIC discussion groups over the periods outlined above. This approach drew upon a previously published framework for understanding strategy-driven, state-sponsored information activities, which are called 'information influence and interference'.⁸ For the purpose of the analysis, articles were considered 'journalist-led' when less than 80% of the articles' content, measured by counting paragraphs, was in the form of direct quotes or statements from regional officials. Any article with more than 80% of its content coming from direct quotes or statements from diplomatic or political officials from local government or overseas was categorised as an 'official statement'.

We conducted a simple categorical sentiment analysis of Facebook posts as a measure of the effectiveness for CCP influence efforts. Public sentiment is a metric that can provide a methodological approach to measuring the effectiveness of the CCP's messaging through a change in online public opinion towards China or Western partners. It is useful for measuring CCP influence in the information environment and the impact on populations, but it does not provide insights into the influence that CCP messaging may have on particular individuals or political elites. Information operations are also just one avenue that the CCP is using to influence PIC populations. The insights garnered from this quantitative sentiment analysis can be used to highlight priority information channels, countries, or narratives that are having a greater effect on online sentiment. Our attempt to baseline the current population sentiment towards foreign partners will also help to identify the long-term effects of CCP messaging through changes in sentiment over time.

To conduct the sentiment analysis, we analysed comments on any Facebook post that linked to material relating to the three identified case study topics in public PIC discussion groups or on the official pages of local media in English and national Pacific languages. Collected comments did not include replies to previous comments. The collected posts were supplemented *ad hoc* by additional posts about the identified topics in local discussion groups that expressed individual opinions but didn't provide links in the posts to any published content on the issue.

We categorised relevant comments as being positive or negative towards an identified country, which had to be explicitly stated in the comment, with the exception of the term 'the West', which we took to be a description of Australia and the US and possibly additional partners in the region, including New Zealand and the UK. Comments that referred to more than one country or group ('the West') were categorised based on the dominant subject of the comment. Our initial collection also sought to analyse online sentiment towards New Zealand, the UK, France and Japan but was prevented due to a lack of relevant data.

In the Facebook commentary for each of the three case studies, the overall percentage of comments targeted towards foreign partners or domestic governments varied significantly. To account for those fluctuations, we included a comment sentiment ratio, which compares the number of positive to negative comments for each country or group over time. In combination with a percentage of total comments, the comment sentiment ratio provides greater insight into online sentiment towards foreign partners across the Pacific. It can be used to better understand Pacific reactions to certain messaging and more accurately detect changes in the effectiveness, effort or approach of CCP online influence efforts in the PICs.

Three key caveats should be acknowledged when understanding the analysis of this data:

- Although the data is comprehensive in its coverage of online public discourse on these topics, the sample size of the overall dataset is still small.
- The data is representative of a subset of the PIC population that not only consumes this online information but comments publicly in news pages and discussion groups. It doesn't include private groups or discussions. Although this isn't a complete representation of the online information in the Pacific, it's a strong sample in terms of diversity and popularity from which to infer an assessment of the information across the region.



- Not all news articles published in these countries in hard copy are published online, mostly because of time and resource constraints. However, it's likely that most articles covering international relations and security issues are included in online publications.

Note that this dataset can't be used to determine how or when online information becomes part of offline public discourse about these issues. Further detail about the Pacific islands online information environment is available in Appendix 1 to provide further context on social media dominance, usage and engagement.

CCP information operations seek to undermine democracy

The CCP wants to create a Pacific region that wholly supports the 'One China' policy and reflexively defers to China as a global power when PICs make economic, diplomatic and security decisions.⁹ The CCP also wants to foster global acceptance of norms that favour its authoritarian system and actions at the expense of current democratic norms and partnerships.¹⁰

As part of the CCP's broader influence efforts in the Pacific, information operations threaten to undermine democracy by altering the ability of citizens to access verified and trustworthy information, amplifying polarisation of communities and beliefs, and denting public trust in elections, governments and foreign partners.¹¹

Effective CCP information operations would be likely to create an environment that's more accepting or even encouraging of deeper engagement with China, reducing the impact of the population as a source of resilience against potentially unhelpful or unwarranted offers of assistance, such as Beijing's proposed region-wide security agreement.¹² If, over time, more of the population fail to reject baseless lies that have been pushed by CCP party-state media, such as accusations that Australia and the US instigated the Honiara riots in 2021, partnerships with and trust in other democratic countries are also at risk of deteriorating, which can reduce the development benefits provided to PICs by Western partners.¹³

The CCP's attempt to control narratives in the Pacific has also damaged democratic and free media across the region, which should be a pillar of all democratic societies.¹⁴ Media activities surrounding Wang Yi's tour of the region generated concerns from Pacific media institutions, local politicians, foreign governments and civil society about the threat posed to free and democratic media in the region.¹⁵ There were several instances of journalists being prevented from asking questions or risking being removed from press conferences and some examples of media boycotting events to protest that behaviour.¹⁶

Channels of CCP influence in the Pacific

The CCP's reach into the Pacific online information environment can be categorised into three core channels:

- party-state media
- PRC diplomats and embassies (through local media outlets or through self-operated social media accounts)
- CCP influence over local media publishers and journalists.

It's important to note that some of the activities conducted in each of those channels are considered to be routine diplomatic practice by most governments when they have the capacity and resources to invest in strategic communications and public diplomacy. But when, for example, those messages are being shared online in a coordinated fashion, supported by illegitimate pressuring and influencing activities, such as harassment or the propagation of CCP narratives by inauthentic social media networks, or when a government is deliberately running targeted disinformation campaigns (overtly and covertly) targeting a topic or another country, such activities fall outside the realm of standard diplomatic practice. Such activities demonstrate a broader influence operation and can often, in fact, be categorised as foreign interference because they're coercive, corrupting and deceptive.¹⁷ In examples examined in this research, the activities we discovered and analysed are seeking to shape, distort and interfere in the Pacific islands information environment.

Party-state media

CCP-controlled state media have evolved in recent years to go beyond targeting China's domestic population and diaspora, with a focus on control of perceptions of the CCP and the promotion of a positive view of China and the CCP regime. Party-state media are now being used to influence mainstream media in various countries, encouraging economic partnerships, suppressing anti-CCP voices, and promoting Taiwan's 'unification'¹⁸ with the mainland.¹⁹

English-language party-state media, such as the *Global Times* and *People's Daily*, frequently report on significant events in the Pacific. However, penetration of those articles directly into Pacific online forums and websites is relatively small and uncoordinated, relying on occasional sharing by individuals in the most popular online groups or pages. This content, along with a growing presence of Chinese-language media content in local newspapers and radio, is unlikely to be targeted towards local PIC populations, but is useful as an indicator of CCP narratives.

PRC diplomats and embassies

Chinese embassies and diplomats use Facebook and Twitter accounts to share information about local activities and promote CCP messaging in the region, although followership isn't usually high. No embassy Facebook page has amassed more than 6,000 Facebook followers. However, the Chinese Embassy account in Kiribati reaches nearly 5% of the total population and more than 10% of social media users and has more than 5,700 followers.²⁰



Diplomats also regularly publish content in Pacific islands media that promotes CCP assistance and highlights the value of China's partnerships in the region.²¹ In some news outlets, such statements can be published as opinion pieces. In others, local journalists republish press releases or directly quote statements from diplomatic events and handover ceremonies. This is also true for other partners in the region, such as Australia and the US, but there's no evidence to suggest that Western press statements are being used to undermine other foreign partners in the Pacific. When published, articles containing CCP narratives can be difficult to distinguish from locally produced content.

CCP influence over local media

CCP activities targeted towards local media professionals and journalists are the most threatening channel of influence in the online information environment. Many Pacific media outlets have reportedly been offered financial and other inducements from Chinese diplomats in exchange for adhering to pro-CCP editorial positions, while others have reported harassment or threats for failing to do so.²²

China has also offered several groups of journalists tours of China to build local support for the country, in addition to Pacific-based training and study scholarships in China.²³ Such training and travel opportunities are standard and welcome practices in the region, as is financial support for local media. However, the pressure placed on media institutions to align with China's preferred narratives combined with training and travel opportunities indicates an intention to interfere with and censor local media reporting.

Several journalists and respected members of society who contribute opinion pieces to local media also have ongoing relationships with Chinese 'friendship associations' in the Pacific. The friendship associations have been identified as some of many groups that have active links with CCP agencies, such as the party's International Liaison and United Front Work departments, as well as the propaganda apparatus, among others, effectively acting as agents of the party-state.²⁴ Around the globe, the friendship groups have been shown to co-opt elites to serve as intermediaries for advancing Beijing's domestic and foreign policy goals.²⁵ The role and effectiveness of these groups is analysed in further detail later in this report.

CCP online influence case studies

This section examines the use of the three influence channels described above and how they were used to shape and interfere in regional public discourse about the establishment of AUKUS, the 2022 Pacific Islands Forum held in Fiji and the CCP's efforts to sign a region-wide security agreement. The case studies explore which channels of influence are used most frequently to push narratives, including disinformation, and whether there's been any evidence that these efforts have had an effect in influencing PIC populations.

Case study 1: Pacific reactions to AUKUS

What happened?

On 15 September 2021, Australia, the UK and the US announced the establishment of AUKUS and the subsequent plan for Australia to obtain and operate nuclear-powered submarines. The CCP responded within days by pushing a narrative that questioned the intent of the agreement and submarine acquisition and presented AUKUS as a threat to the Indo-Pacific region.

What was the CCP's narrative and objective?

In its online messaging, the CCP promoted clear narratives and disinformation, including claims that Australia's agreement to obtain nuclear submarines was in breach of the Treaty of Rarotonga and a threat to PICs' security and prosperity.²⁶ The CCP sought to undermine the AUKUS partners' strong relations with PICs by exaggerating concerns over nuclear safety and sought further international support for challenging the AUKUS partnership on the global stage.

How did the CCP seek to influence the Pacific?

In the two months following the AUKUS announcement, party-state media provided a near constant stream of articles that criticised AUKUS both as a partnership and as a global security threat, supported by more than 160 Facebook posts by Chinese state media pages. However, only two of those articles directly addressed how the AUKUS agreement would affect PICs, indicating that the CCP's efforts to raise concerns were probably targeted at international audiences more broadly.²⁷

The CCP also attempted to leverage voice as part of its global influence agenda. For example, party-state media exaggerated a joint statement released on 21 October from the inaugural China – Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers Meeting (CPICFMM). A *Global Times* article on the same day claimed that the statement 'mirrored China's concerns about AUKUS' and that the deal pushes the region to the 'brink of war'.²⁸ According to the article, Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi criticised the AUKUS partnership at the meeting, claiming that the agreement would create risks of nuclear proliferation, 'jeopardize the South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone Treaty, introduce an arms race and damage regional peace and stability'. However, the statement released by the CPICFMM called on relevant parties to fulfil nuclear treaty obligations but contained no other mention of the AUKUS agreement.²⁹

What was the effect?

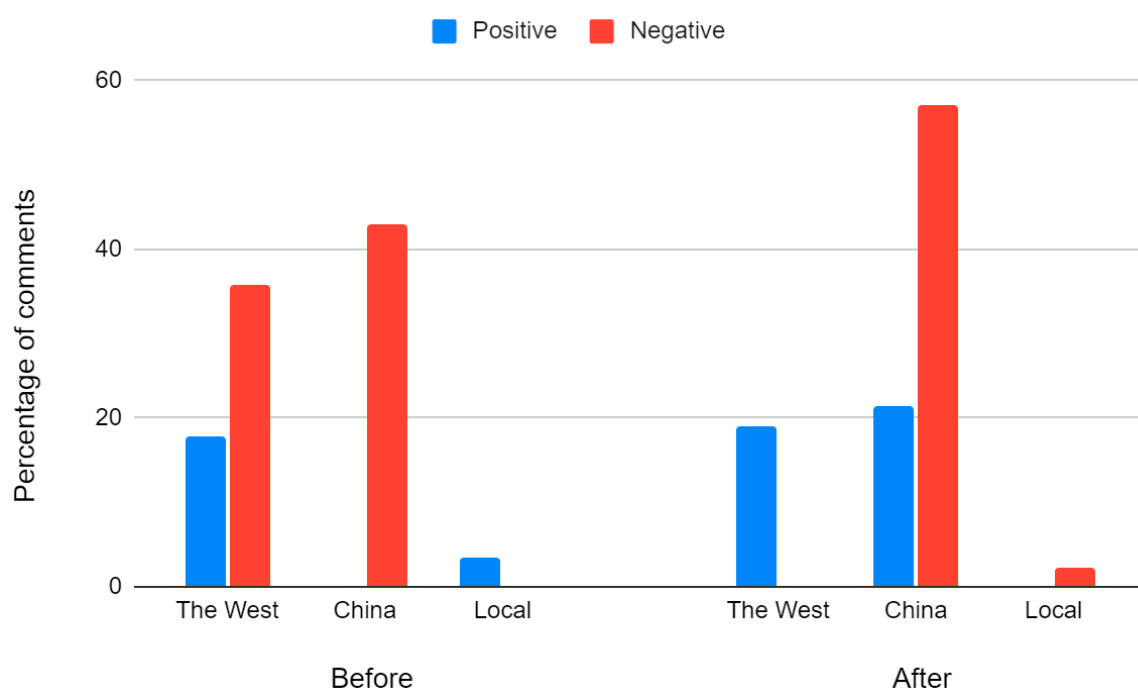
Twenty-eight online articles published by 31 news outlets across the Pacific reported on the AUKUS agreement during the data-collection period. Of those, 22 were republished content from Western media outlets, including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the British Broadcasting Corporation, *The Guardian*, the *New York Times*, *Radio NZ* and *Reuters*. Unlike party-state media, those outlets are independent of state control. Many of these articles highlighted regional concerns over the agreement and criticised the lack of consultation before the announcement.

No local newspapers published online content originating from Chinese state media. However, two Solomon Islands newspapers (the *Solomon Star* and the *Sunday Isles*) published statements from the Chinese Embassy in Solomon Islands that incorporated the exaggerated narrative regarding Pacific support for Wang Yi's claims.³⁰

There was limited online reaction from the Pacific population to the AUKUS announcement, and it was mostly negative towards China. In addition to the 28 articles online, a further 27 Facebook posts were made by individuals about AUKUS or nuclear submarines in local public discussion groups that did contain a link to a media article. Those 55 pieces of content (combined articles and Facebook posts) generated a total of 108 Facebook comments in response, which was indicative of the perceived relevance of AUKUS to the broader Pacific population. Seventy of those comments displayed a clear positive or negative sentiment towards a country, and a slim majority (36 of 70) were negative towards China. Thirteen of the 23 comments about the West were positive, and more than half of those defended the West's actions as a means to counter the rising threat of China.

To measure the effectiveness of the CCP's influence attempt by leveraging the CPICFMM's inaugural statement, we compared the relative percentages of positive and negative comments towards each country or group of countries before and after the meeting was held (Figure 1). From this albeit small dataset of 108 comments, the joint statement from China and Pacific leaders and its media coverage didn't affect the overall level of positive comments towards the West. There was also no negative commentary towards the West following the CPICFMM, and the percentage of negative commentary towards China increased.

Figure 1: Sentiment analysis of PIC populations' reaction to the AUKUS agreement, displaying positive and negative comments to each country or group of countries before and after the China – Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers Meeting



Note: The 'local' category refers to sentiment towards the national government in the country local to the media outlet or the discussion page in which the comment was posted.

What's the key takeaway?

The CCP's attempt to undermine the AUKUS countries' existing partnerships with the region had limited penetration into the online information environment and failed to generate a desired shift in the online ecosystem against the AUKUS partners.

Case study 2: China's regional security agreement

What happened?

Ahead of the second CPICFMM, the CCP sought agreement on a region-wide agreement covering cooperation on policing, security and data communication. Pacific leaders pushed back against the CCP's 'pre-determined joint communique', unwilling to blindly follow the script, and Australia and other partners expressed concerns over potential security risks.³¹ From 26 May to 4 June, Wang Yi went on a regional tour, signing a total of 52 bilateral agreements across the Pacific and in Timor-Leste.³² Details on the agreements are limited, and media at press events were tightly controlled in a number of Pacific countries, sparking outrage from local journalists.³³

What was the CCP's narrative and objective?

During Wang's tour, the CCP sought to promote the value of China's assistance throughout the region. Wang also encouraged Pacific countries not to be 'too anxious' or 'too nervous' to work with China and portrayed China's proposed agreement as heeding the call of the Pacific.³⁴ Party-state media claimed that 'Australia and the US have no interest in the needs of Pacific island countries beyond dominating them', and China's then Ambassador to Fiji, Qian Bo, sought to label Western partners as having a 'Cold War mentality' in the region.³⁵

How did the CCP seek to influence the Pacific?

In the three-week data-collection period beginning on 22 May, party-state media produced at least 57 articles on PIC issues. Twenty-three per cent of the articles were aimed at undermining Western partnerships with the region, criticising Western cooperation with Pacific countries, labelling Australia and the US as having a 'Cold War mentality' and suggesting that their assistance in the region was illegitimate. A further 5% of articles claimed that Wang Yi's trip to the region, and the resulting agreements, were evidence of the West losing power to China. The remaining articles were mostly focused on describing the positive benefits of the relationship with China, although mostly not without a critical comparison to other partners.

China's regional diplomats, and the touring Wang Yi, were extremely active in pushing the CCP's narrative through local media. CCP official statements reported by local media accounted for half of all official statements reported during the collection period (21 of 42), outnumbering published articles based on Pacific leaders' official statements (17) and statements made by Western officials during the same period (four).



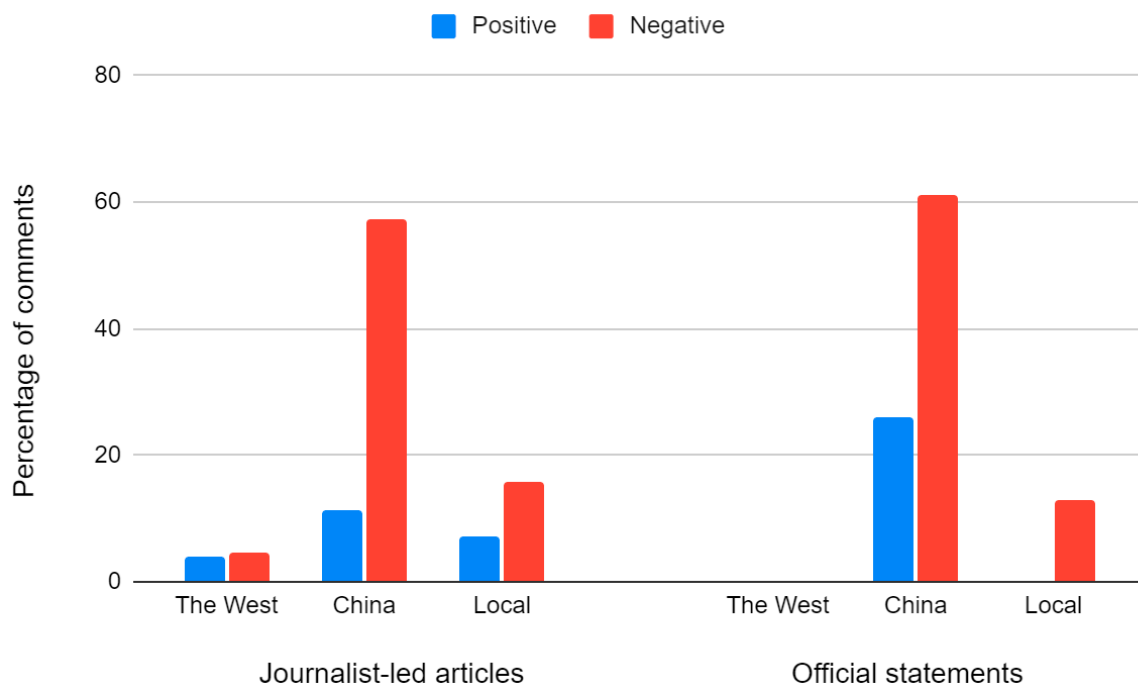
What was the effect?

Party-state media gained very little traction in the Pacific islands online information environment. Only four of 57 articles were shared in public Pacific Facebook groups, receiving a total of 13 comments, six of which were negative towards China, four of which were positive towards China, and one of which was negative towards Australia. No party-state media articles were republished in local media.

In comparison, 31 of the 105 journalist-led articles published in local media (classified as content containing less than 80% in the form of direct quotes or statements from local or foreign government officials) reporting on the proposed agreements and Wang Yi's visit were from Western-based independent media outlets. Of the 223 relevant comments on posts sharing local media articles, the majority were negative towards China (57% of total comments) and were 5.3 times more common than positive commentary towards China (Figure 2). In contrast, negative Western commentary was almost balanced (1.1 times more negative comments), and negative host-country commentary was 2.2 times more common than positive commentary.

When we compared sentiment in commentary on Facebook posts linking to official-led articles, we found a similar level of anti-China commentary (61%) but greater pro-China commentary. Critically, the pro-China comments were mostly found on Pacific official-led articles, not on articles published by CCP diplomats in the region. In the official statement pieces that originated from Chinese diplomats, relevant commentary was almost entirely negative (17 of 18 comments), which was significantly different from the almost balanced sentiment of comments on official statements from local governments (16 of 29 comments were negative).

Figure 2: Sentiment analysis of PIC populations' reaction to Wang Yi's regional tour and associated agreements, including the proposed regional security and economic agreement



Note: This graph displays the percentage of positive and negative comments to each country or group of countries from comments on journalist-led articles (articles containing less than 80% direct quotes or statements from local or foreign government officials; $n = 223$), and official statements made by Chinese, Western and local Pacific diplomats published in local media ($n = 54$). The 'local' category refers to the sentiment towards the national government in the country local to the media outlet or discussion page in which the comment was posted.

What's the key takeaway?

The CCP's attempt to alleviate local concerns over proposed security agreements and to criticise the West had little impact on local population sentiment online. Although CCP officials were active in making media statements, those statements resulted in a greater proportion of negative responses online compared to statements made by local officials and journalists.

Case study 3: The 2022 Pacific Islands Forum Summit

What happened?

The 51st Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), hosted in Suva from 11 to 14 July 2022, initially saw all 21 foreign 'dialogue partners' (including the US and China) disinvited from the forum due to concerns over foreign invitees co-opting the forum into a geostrategic wrestling match.³⁶ However, US Vice President Kamala Harris was then allowed to address the forum, where she announced the Biden administration's new and rejuvenated Pacific agenda. Harris committed to tripling funding for economic development and ocean resilience in the Pacific to US\$600 million over 10 years, establishing new embassies in Tonga and Kiribati, and re-establishing a regional mission of the US Agency for International Development in Suva.³⁷

What was the CCP's narrative and objective?

In the days surrounding the Pacific Islands Forum meeting, the CCP advanced narratives designed to denigrate Western engagement with PICs and represent Chinese engagement as sophisticated, constructive and popular. In particular, the CCP made strong efforts to frame Australia and the US as paternalistic, immaturely competitive and determined to perpetuate a 'new Cold War in the Pacific'.³⁸ In contrast, the CCP framed China's engagement with the region as focused on prosperity and cooperation but victimised by malicious and unfounded rumours perpetuated by the West.³⁹

How did the CCP seek to influence the Pacific?

Within the two-week data-collection period beginning roughly one week before the commencement of the forum, Chinese state-sponsored media published 20 articles advancing the above narratives, primarily through the *Global Times*. Eleven of the 20 articles (55%) pushed a primarily pro-CCP narrative, using rhetoric that framed Sino-Pacific relationships as inherently mutually productive and emphasised areas of cooperation. Six of the articles (35%) adopted a critical stance, characterising the behaviour of the US and Australia as aggressive, patriarchal and power hungry. The remaining three articles (15%) were too descriptive and/or too brief to be appropriately sorted into either category.

Interestingly, characterisations of New Zealand within Chinese state-sponsored media were generally positive. Two *Global Times* articles congratulated the Ardern administration for its 'softened' stance against China and labelled New Zealand a 'key partner' for the Pacific.

The Facebook pages of Chinese embassies within PICs also provide an avenue for the advancement of those narratives. The activity of Chinese embassy Facebook pages varies from country to country, but those in Solomon Islands and Fiji were particularly active during the data-collection period. However, little of the content posted by those embassies was focused on the Pacific Islands Forum, and thus didn't merit closer consideration within the scope of this case study.



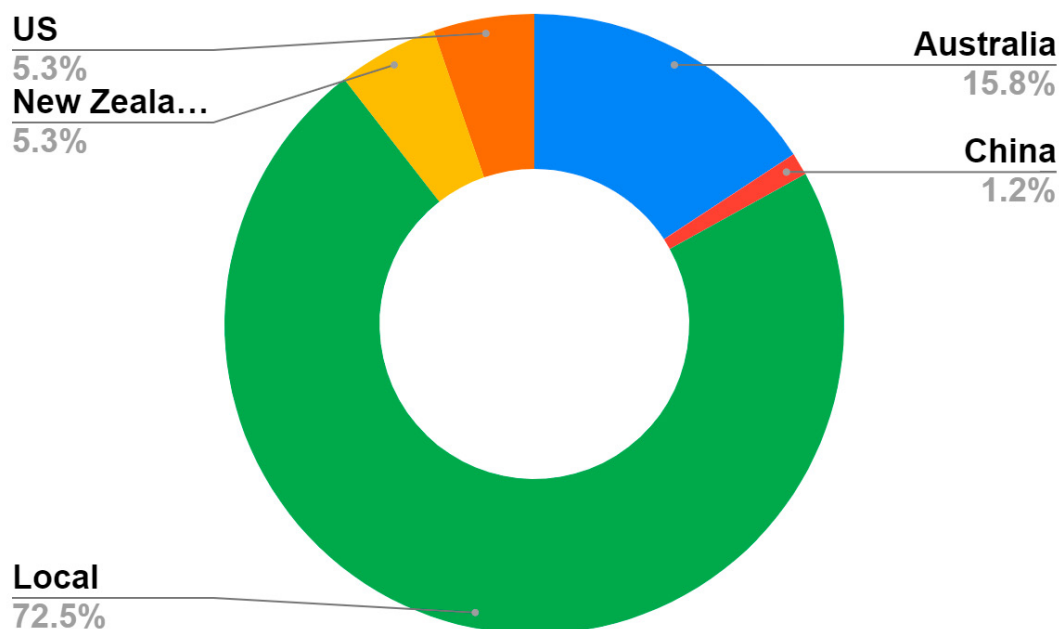
What was the effect?

As in other case studies in this report, few of the articles published by party-state media gained traction within the Pacific's online information environment. Only four of the 20 articles (20%) published during the data-collection period were shared in public Pacific Facebook groups. Further, only one of those articles generated more than one interaction in the form of a like, comment or share within the group. Even this single relatively high-performing article was far from an effective execution of pro-CCP influence strategy, which was demonstrated by the 10 comments, which were largely split between defending the Chinese Government, general frustration with the Pacific's dependence on foreign powers and strong condemnations of China's foreign and domestic policies, including Sino-Russian relations.

Compounding this failure, CCP rhetoric in the wake of the Pacific Islands Forum was unable to effectively penetrate local PIC newspapers. ASPI's categorical sentiment analysis reveals that, for this case study, local media plays a key role in generating positive interactions within the online Pacific media environment. When we analysed 459 Facebook comments on 171 articles posted to public Pacific Facebook pages, articles written locally achieved a positive-to-negative comment ratio over five times higher than foreign-authored pieces.

Figure 3 demonstrates the critical failure of CCP content to penetrate the Pacific's information environment. While local content understandably dominates the vast majority of locally published newspaper articles, the combination of Australian, US and New Zealand content is included within more than 26% of PIF-related articles, compared to China's 1%. This vast difference is indicative of Pacific media's intense preference for Western sources that are independent of state control.

Figure 3: Countries of origin for reporting on the Pacific Islands Forum ($n = 171$)



Note: The 'local' category refers to the sentiment towards the national government in the country local to the media outlet or discussion page in which the comment was posted.

What's the key takeaway?

The CCP's efforts to, first, frame the US and Australia as patriarchal and belligerent in the wake of the Pacific Islands Forum, and, second, to promote Chinese engagement with the Pacific as a facilitator of the region's prosperity struggled to cut through to the region's online population. Critically, CCP rhetoric achieved minimal penetration into the Pacific's local media reporting of the PIF, which means it's unlikely that it was able to significantly affect regional public perceptions of Chinese or Western engagement in the Pacific.

Trends across the case studies

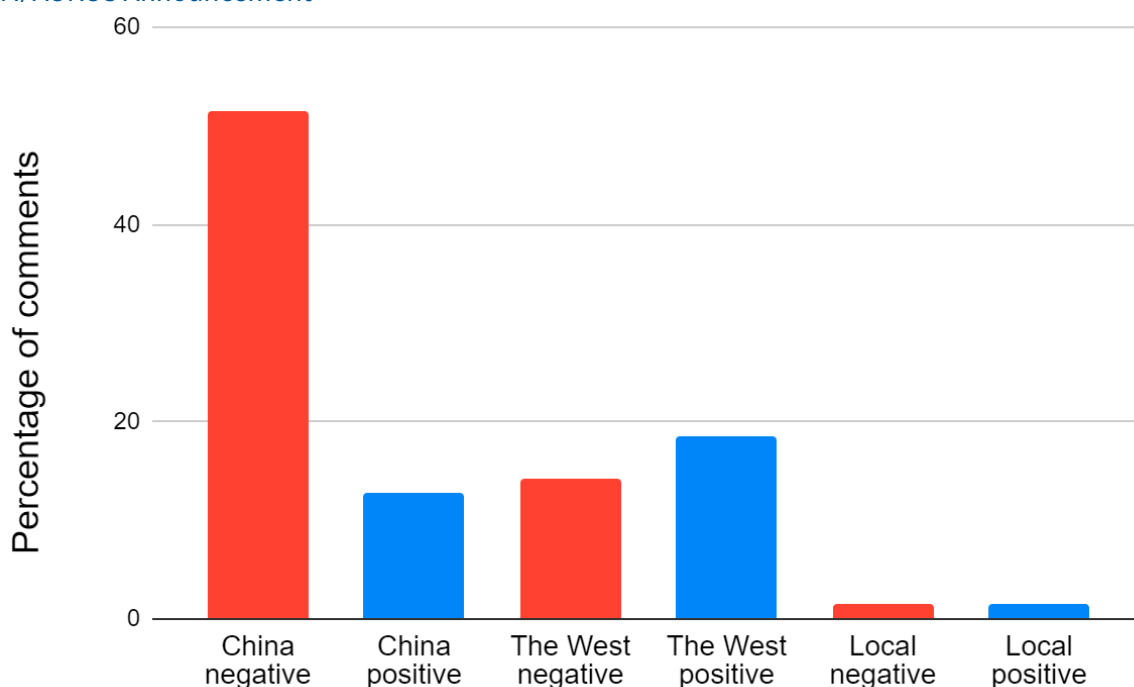
Our analysis of the three primary case studies also uncovered a series of cross-cutting trends in the Pacific online information environment. These trends play an important role in the Pacific media and information environment and should factor into our understanding of current CCP information operations' effectiveness and level of activity.

The ratio of positive and negative comments is a more accurate measure of change in online sentiment over time

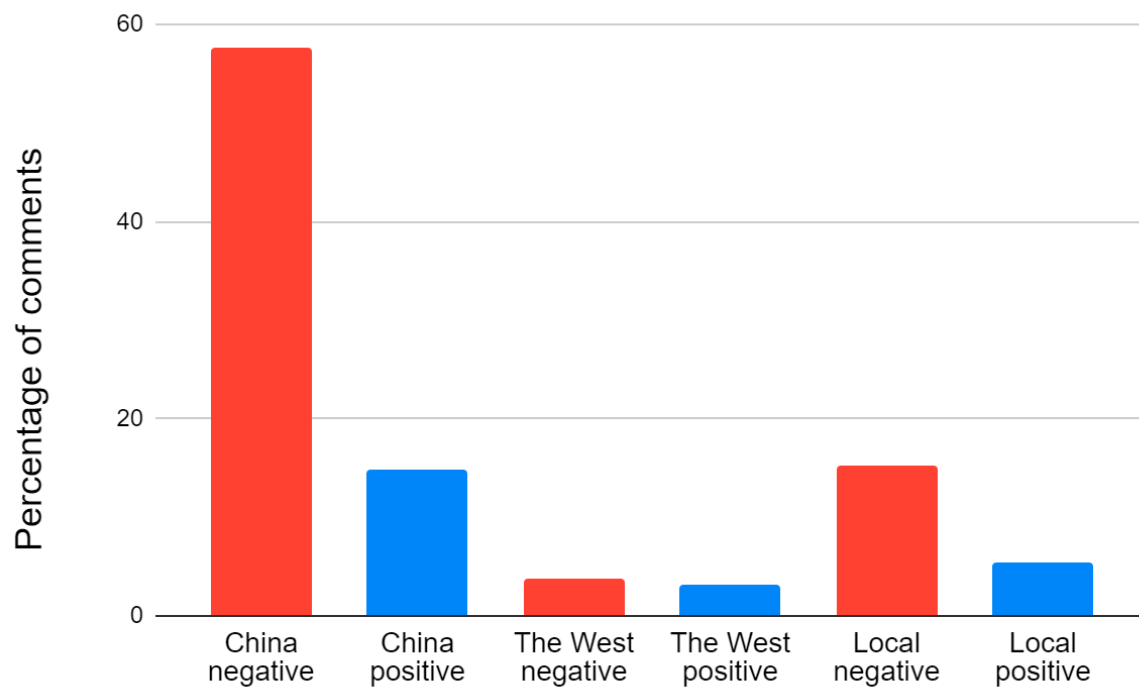
We used the percentage of comments categorised as positive or negative towards China, the West or the local PIC government to track online sentiment across the three case studies. Figure 4 shows that, in response to the AUKUS announcement and China's regional agreement proposal, the majority of relevant comments were anti-China. That wasn't the case in the Pacific Islands Forum case study, that found the majority of the comments online were positive towards PIC governments and leaders. This is probably due to China's limited presence and importance in the PIF case study.

Figure 4: Sentiment towards countries or groups as a percentage of total comments for each case study:

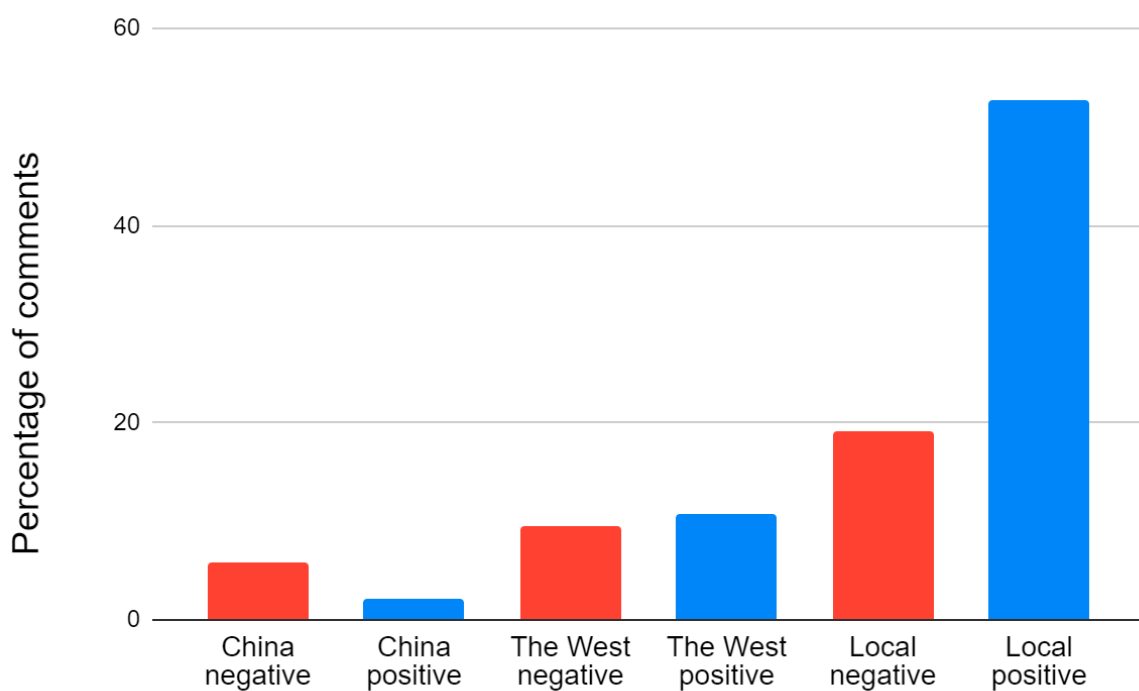
A) AUKUS Announcement



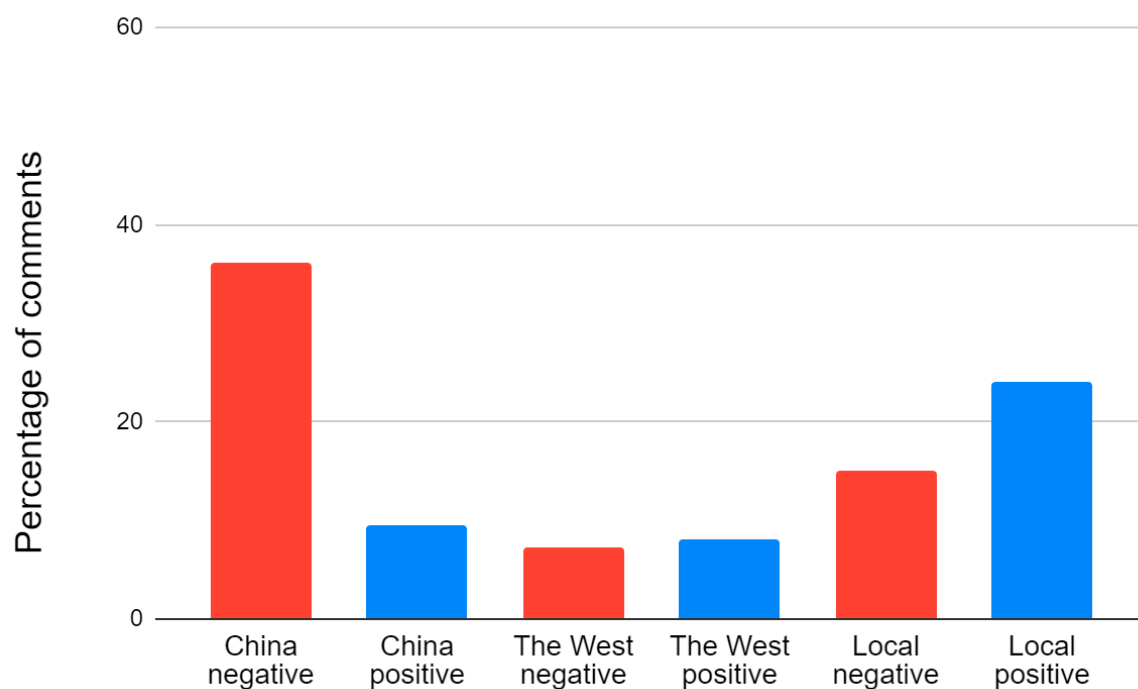
B) Regional security agreement



C) Pacific Islands Forum



D) Total



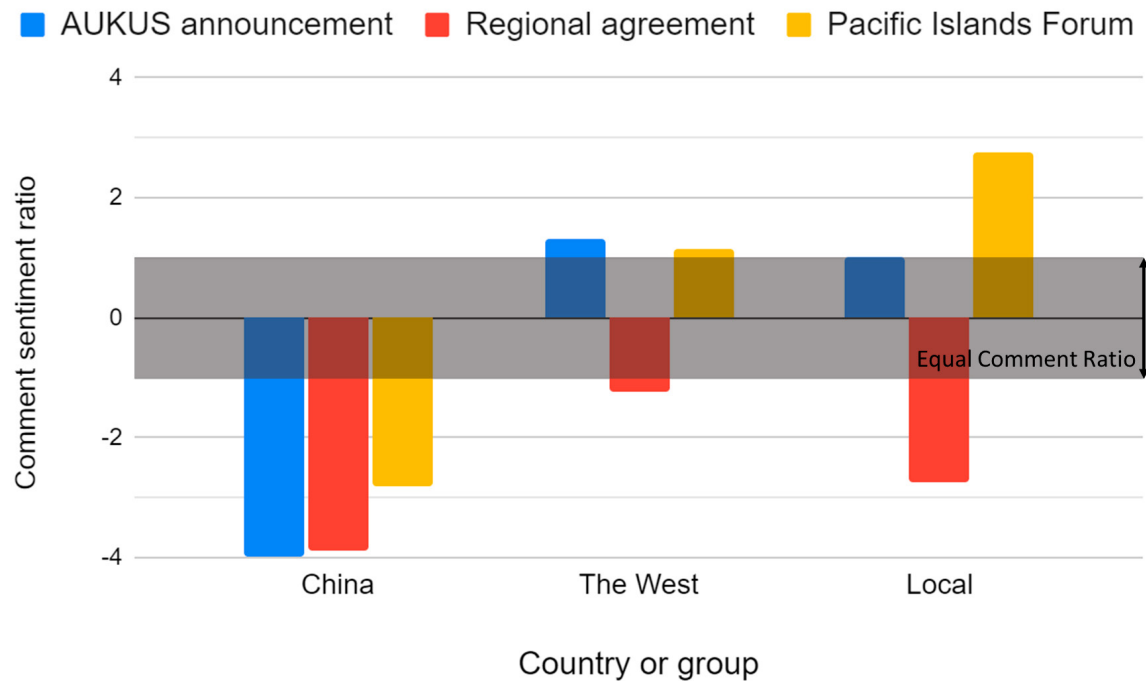
Note: AUKUS (A) $n = 70$; regional security agreement (B) $n = 290$; Pacific Islands Forum (C) $n = 241$; total (D) $n = 601$. The 'local' category refers to the sentiment towards the national government in the country local to the media outlet or discussion page in which the comment was posted.

Simply comparing the percentage of overall comments between the case studies suggests that, although a percentage comparison can be useful in detecting trends over time, it doesn't appropriately account for the varying degree of attention particular foreign states or actors may receive during any one event or time period.

In our previous report measuring online sentiment in Solomon Islands, this was accounted for by measuring the change in sentiment before and after certain events during the case-study data-collection period.⁴⁰ Because reporting and data collection on these region-wide events is much shorter in time, an alternative method to compare sentiment over time is to look at the ratio between positive and negative commentary for each country or group.

Comparing the ratio of positive and negative commentary for each country or group shows that, regardless of the level in which China features in PIC commentary for any case study, the ratio of negative-to-positive commentary remains relatively constant at 2.8 to 4 negative comments per positive comment. Similarly, the comment sentiment ratio for the West remains relatively constant at around an equal number of positive to negative comments (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Comment sentiment ratio for each country or group across the three case studies



Note: A comment sentiment ratio of 1/-1 indicates an equal amount of positive and negative commentary, while a ratio of 2 indicates two positive comments for each negative comment. A ratio of -2 indicates twice as many negative comments as positive comments. The 'local' category refers to the sentiment towards the national government in the country local to the media outlet or discussion page in which the comment was posted.

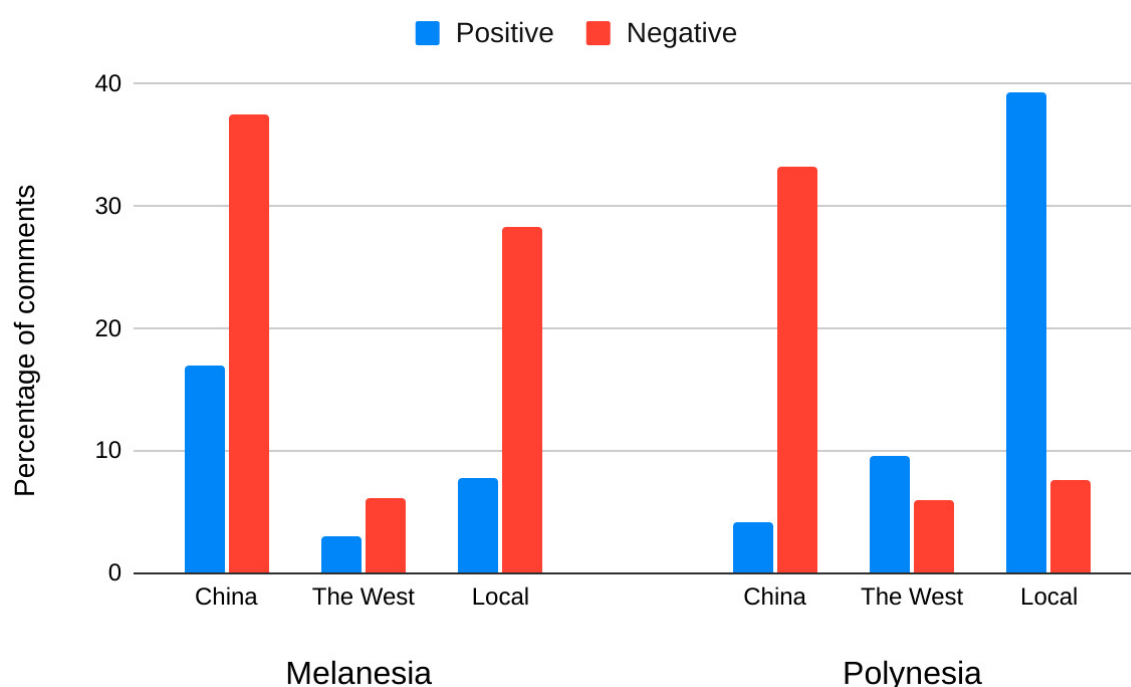
The use of the comment sentiment ratio across case studies accounts for the change in relative importance of particular countries for certain events. As we can see by comparing figures 5 and 6, although there was a steep decline in the percentage of anti-China commentary overall during the PIF, there was only a slight change in the ratio of negative-to-positive commentary. In contrast, the change in sentiment towards local PIC governments between case studies is highlighted more by using the comment sentiment ratio approach.

For future case studies examining the effectiveness of information operations over time, a combination of the percentage of comments and the comment sentiment ratio will provide greater insight into the effectiveness of such operations.

Differences in online sentiment across regions

When we combined the sentiment data from all three case studies, we found that there was no significant difference in the overall percentage of anti-China sentiment or anti-West sentiment between Melanesia and Polynesia (Figure 6; the dataset for Micronesia was too small to be included).

Figure 6: Difference in online sentiment between Melanesia and Polynesia using combined Facebook commentary sentiment towards a country or group from all three case studies ($n = 544$)



Note: The 'local' category refers to the sentiment towards the national government in the country local to the media outlet or discussion page in which the comment was posted.

This data again highlights the limitations of percentage comparisons between groups. Instead, comparing the China comment sentiment ratio between the two regions shows that there are nearly four times as many negative comments per positive comment in Polynesia compared to Melanesia (comment sentiment ratio for Polynesia = -8.1 , Melanesia = -2.2). Additionally, there are twice as many negative comments per positive comment about the West in Melanesia (comment sentiment ratio = -2) compared to 0.63 negative comments per positive comment in Polynesia (comment sentiment ratio = -0.63). Although the sample size is small, particularly for Western commentary ($n = 80$), the use of the comment sentiment ratio highlights the need for greater prioritisation of effort towards countering CCP information operations in Melanesia.

Across the three case studies, anti-local-government commentary in Melanesia was focused mainly on political corruption, while the significant pro-local government commentary in Polynesia mostly came through via strong support expressed for Samoan Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa.

Differences in engagement across channels of influence

In the three case studies, there was less engagement on CCP produced and directed content compared to Western or locally produced content. However, CCP official-led articles, although small in sample size, generated more engagement online than party-state media articles or Australian and local government official-led articles.

Ninety-five articles (with public comments allowed on the post) were shared online in the three case studies, receiving 2,130 comments in total. Overall, articles of Chinese origin (CCP official-led articles and CCP party-state media articles) received less engagement than articles of Australian, US or Pacific origin (Table 1). However, a breakdown of the channel of influence shows that CCP official-led

articles were more effective in generating engagement than Australian or Pacific official-led articles, and more effective than party-state media articles. This information comes from a small sample size, but reinforces that pattern seen in ASPI's recent report, *Suppressing the truth and spreading lies: how the CCP influences the Solomon Islands' information environment*, which showed that CCP official-led articles are the most effective channel of influence for the CCP.⁴¹

Only one US official-led article received comments (an article by Ben Bilua in Solomon Islands' the *Island Sun* that directly quoted US Vice President Harris's announcements at the Pacific Islands Forum) and was one of the most engaging articles in the data-collection period, generating 46 comments. Overall, the ability for any diplomat to engage on these events was low, unlike the Honiara riots case study examined in ASPI's previous report, in which CCP officials capitalised on the crisis to spread anti-Western narratives in local media, producing almost the same amount of content on the cause of the riots as Solomon Islands' officials.

Table 1: Average number of comments for articles shared online in Pacific media, analysed by country of origin and type of article

Country	Media		Official-led		Total	
	Number of articles	Average comments	Number of articles	Average comments	Number of articles	Average comments
Australia	9	28	3	3	12	21
China	11	6	2	34	13	11
Local	55	25	14	23	69	24
US			1	46	1	46

Media = journalist and party-state media articles; Official-led = press releases, opinion pieces and articles that are more than 80% direct quotes from a government official.

Note: The 'local' category refers to the sentiment towards the national government in the country local to the media outlet or discussion page in which the comment was posted.

Analysing the effectiveness of Pacific voices in CCP messaging

The use of Pacific voices to push CCP-aligned messages in the region is an information channel of growing concern. Since 2019, the CCP has increasingly used PIC elites and media professionals as part of its coordinated information operations in PICs. These local actors often have close ties to UFWD-linked groups, such as friendship associations (see Appendix 2 for further details on Chinese friendship associations in the Pacific). Due to our limited dataset and a lack of penetration into the Pacific islands online information environment, so far, this area of influence appears to have had limited effectiveness for the CCP. However, this approach appears to be an emerging area of effort by the CCP and should be monitored, as it could potentially be highly influential in the future.

Alfred Sasako

In our October 2022 ASPI research on Solomon Islands, we highlighted that Solomon Islands journalist Alfred Sasako, who is Vice President of the Solomon Islands – China Friendship Association, reported that Taiwan was responsible for inciting the November 2021 Honiara riots, providing unsubstantiated

claims and quotes from a ‘writer using the name of George Belau’.⁴² In the data collection we conducted for this research, we found that, following the AUKUS announcement in September 2021, Sasako published an article in the *Solomon Star* (the largest selling newspaper in Solomon Islands) on 21 September that described the Solomon Islands’ Lofung Border Outpost as a ‘Nuclear-Powered Submarine Base’⁴³ (the online version of this article was later removed).

The claims made in the article strongly align with the CCP’s objectives identified in Case study 1 to spread anger and alarm at Australia’s then-recent announcement that it would acquire nuclear-powered submarines from the US or the UK and to undermine Australia’s partnership with Solomon Islands. Both the Australian and Solomon Islands governments issued statements shortly after the *Solomon Star* article was published to clarify that the article had no basis in fact. The Solomon Islands Government Communications Unit also expressed ‘disappointment’ and stated that ‘such unsubstantiated information and article poses security risk’ and ‘should not be taken lightly as such misleading information has the potential to derail an important national project’.⁴⁴

To be clear: there’s no evidence to suggest that Sasako published either of those articles under the direction of the CCP. However, he has previously been accused of spreading ‘Chinese propaganda’ in ‘seriously misleading’ articles by multiple Solomon Islands media outlets, including the *Solomon Star* newspaper prior to his employment there.⁴⁵

Beginning in 2022, Alfred Sasako has also contributed to the party-state media outlet, the *Global Times*. Initially quoted in an article criticising the US’s interests in Solomon Islands and the Pacific in February 2022, Sasako provided a lengthy interview that again criticised Australia’s and the US’s involvement in Solomon Islands on the eve of the Pacific Islands Forum Summit Meeting in July 2022.⁴⁶ On 29 September, in response to the inaugural US – Pacific Island Country Summit in Washington, Sasako published an opinion article in the *Global Times* titled ‘Useless for US to use symbolism to woo PICs’.⁴⁷ Each of these articles aligns with the CCPs objective of undermining Australian and US partnerships in the Pacific.

These publications indicate an emerging pattern in which the CCP seeks to engage with Pacific voices to push CCP-aligned messages during key regional events, including the PIF and the US–PIC Summit in Washington. This is also in line with the party’s longstanding international strategy to ‘borrow a mouth to speak’ and ‘use international friends to carry out propaganda’.⁴⁸ While these party-state media articles may have achieved the desired effects in China and elsewhere across the globe, the effectiveness of this messaging in the Pacific appears to be minimal. None of the three *Global Times* articles was shared via a link to any public Pacific Facebook page, and they amassed a total of only nine private shares, according to CrowdTangle data. Sasako published other content in the *Solomon Star* but didn’t publish similar editorials on these topics around the same time that he was contributing to the *Global Times*.

Siamelie Latu

Colonel (Ret’d) Siamelie Latu provides another example of sharing CCP-aligned messages in local media. Latu is the former Ambassador to China and current Secretary-General of the Tonga–China Friendship Association.⁴⁹ He regularly contributes opinion pieces, listed as ‘Sponsored Promoted



Content’, on Tonga’s leading news website, *Matangi Tonga*. Since June 2019, Latu has published a total of eight such opinion pieces, targeted towards promoting the benefits of a strong partnership with the CCP, including through the Belt and Road Initiative, Confucius institutes and China’s membership in the UN Security Council.⁵⁰

Latu didn’t contribute opinion pieces in relation to the topics of the three case studies in this report. However, like Sasako’s, his articles often coincided with key events happening in Tonga. For example, Latu capitalised on China’s support to Tonga following the devastating eruption of the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha’apai volcano on 15 January 2022 to promote the importance of the Tonga China Friendship Association.⁵¹ On 19 November 2019, he also published an article countering foreign and domestic concerns that China’s aid to the Pacific region was creating opportunities for ‘debt-traps’ to occur.⁵² In another article, published on 4 October 2019, he wrote on China’s influence in the Pacific, stating that ‘China’s growing presence is a new reality that needs to be accommodated, not resisted’ and that ‘accommodating China’s role requires great understanding of Chinese interest and views’.⁵³ In the same article, Latu used some personal anecdotes of his time spent as the Tongan Ambassador to Beijing to explain the importance of recognising and adhering to the One China policy.

Latu’s articles support CCP objectives in the region by dispelling concerns over certain aspects of China’s engagement and encouraging greater cooperation with the CCP diplomatically, economically and through people-to-people links, such as those established by the friendship association he leads as Secretary-General. Those articles, however, had minimal penetration into the Pacific’s online information environment. According to CrowdTangle data, only four of the eight articles have been shared in public Facebook groups online, and three of those shared received no public interactions through likes, comments or shares. The only shared link on a public page that received interactions was titled ‘China not involved in debt trap diplomacy’ and was shared on ‘The Kingdom Politics’ Facebook page.⁵⁴ It received 35 likes and 10 comments, half of which were negative towards China and Latu’s statements.

Although this is a small sample, it demonstrates that, when local Pacific voices are clearly promoting pro-CCP messages, they generate very little online engagement and don’t appear to have significant influence on how the online population perceives these issues and partnerships.

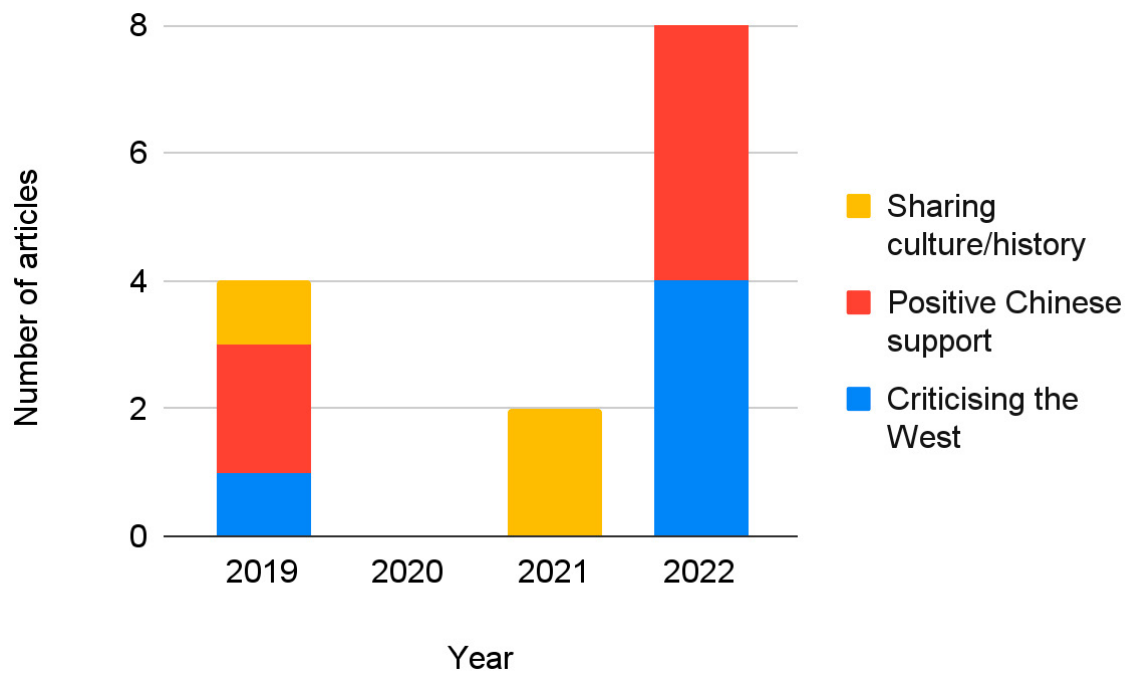
Pacific contributions to party-state media

Alfred Sasako and Siamelie Latu are two examples of individuals who have contributed to PIC media, but there are more examples of individuals, including many who are members of various China–PIC friendship associations and who also contribute to party-state media. By expanding the data-collection period beyond the three case studies examined in this report, we’ve identified a total of six individuals who are members of UFWD-linked friendship associations in the region (including in the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu) and who have provided interviews, quotes or other content aligned with CCP messaging through party-state media.

Those six individuals have contributed to party-state media a total of 14 times since 2019, including in the *Global Times* (6), *People’s Daily* (4), *China Daily* (2), *Xinhua* (1) and *CGTN* (1). Of those 14 articles, eight were quotes from the individuals, four were direct interviews, and two were authored by PIC individuals (one in 2019 by Hiria Ottino⁵⁵ and one in 2022 by Alfred Sasako⁵⁶). Figure 7 shows that the

number of articles increased overall in 2022, as did the number of articles that have criticised the West (led by Sasako's three articles in 2022). Most articles were focused on highlighting the historical and cultural similarities between PICs and China and selling the benefits of Chinese support, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative. These articles support CCP objectives by portraying China as a more suitable and beneficial partner than the West, and are then supported by those that criticise the West and aim to undermine existing partnerships between PICs and Australia and the US.

Figure 7: The themes of party-state media articles quoting, interviewing or being authored by a member of a China–PIC friendship association over time



Analysis of these articles shows that they had no public online penetration into the PICs' information environment. No public Facebook group shared links to any of the articles, and there were no detected discussion posts relating to these individuals and their opinions voiced in party-state media in the week surrounding the publication of the articles. As a result, we couldn't conduct sentiment analysis on these articles to compare their effectiveness in shifting the population's opinion on these topics. These articles published in party-state media are unlikely to be primarily targeted towards a Pacific audience. Instead, they currently appear to use the additional legitimacy provided by a local Pacific voice to reach a broader global audience.

Despite the small number of state-media articles published, and the lack of public penetration into the PICs, the contributions made by individuals associated with CCP UFWD-linked groups should be monitored further. Having started in only 2019, this is an emerging information channel for CCP influence. And, as we've noted in our earlier analysis, locally produced content generally creates greater engagement online than CCP-produced content.



Conclusion, policy recommendations and future research

Building on our previous work,⁵⁷ this research looks regionally and reveals that similar information channels are being used to influence online populations in PICs in an attempt to undermine democracy and the relationship between PICs and Western partners, particularly Australia and the US.

These case studies focused on regional narratives demonstrate how, despite increased effort, the CCP has had limited effect in truly shifting online sentiment through its broader, regionally coordinated information operations. But our analysis also shows that there are differences across the region in response to CCP narratives online. In Melanesia, the response is less negative towards the CCP—this includes Solomon Islands, where more tailored, country-targeted, coordinated information operations have been shown to have some effect in shifting public sentiment.⁵⁸ The CCP's use of local media and local voices to further its message demonstrates the party's intent to further shape the PICs' online information environment, despite its so far limited effectiveness on a regional scale.

Greater monitoring of CCP information and interference activity, including how disinformation is deployed and what types of regional narratives are pushed, is important. However, even greater priority should be placed on tracking the efforts and effectiveness of activities targeted towards political elites and populations in countries displaying less resilience to CCP information operations, particularly in Melanesia. In addition to those identified in this report, other channels of influence warranting further investigation include the delivery of aid and infrastructure by Chinese state-owned enterprises and the CCP's political influence through groups such as the Solomon Islands – China Friendship Association. The presence and impact of CCP narratives and disinformation pushed through short-wave radio and TV also remains a significant research gap.

This analysis refines and improves upon our baseline understanding of CCP activity, narratives and effectiveness in influencing PIC populations. The addition of the comment sentiment ratio helps to underline important distinctions between regions and provides a more accurate method of measuring sentiment about a variety of events in which the importance and relevance of China or the West to the topic may fluctuate. Ongoing monitoring of CCP influence operations across the region can be used to indicate changes in CCP influence tactics and effectiveness. Updated information on the use, penetration and effectiveness of certain channels of influence can be used to notify policymakers of the need to tailor engagement, support and training packages to better counter the evolving threat of coordinated information operations.

We encourage policymakers to consider the following recommendations:

1. *Pacific partners, including Australia, the US, New Zealand, Japan, the UK and the European Union, need to increase support to, and enhance partnerships with, PIC media outlets in order to build a stronger and more resilient media industry.* Local media have been shown to reach a larger online audience, and greater media resilience in the Pacific will create an industry that's less vulnerable to disinformation and pressures exerted by CCP officials. This effort should include further assistance in training and retaining high-quality professional journalists and media executives, and providing financial support without conditions to uphold media freedom in the Pacific, which continues to be at risk of being eroded. Australia's robust and neutral media institutions should be at the forefront

of these partnership strengthening efforts, especially the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, which could be provided with additional funding to play a greater role in training, long-term secondments and hosting regional staff exchanges across the Pacific islands region.

2. *As part of their targeted training package, Pacific islands media and security institutions, such as the Pacific Fusion Centre, should receive further training on identifying disinformation and coordinated information operations to assist with building media resiliency.* For this training to be effective, governments should fund additional research into the actors and activities affecting the PICs' information environment, including climate-change and election disinformation and misinformation, and foreign influence activities.
3. *Pacific partners, particularly Australia and the US, need to be more active, effective and transparent in communicating how aid delivered to the region is benefiting PICs and building people-to-people links.* Doing so will debunk some of the CCP's narratives regarding Western support and legitimacy in the region. Locally based diplomats need to work more frequently and closely with local journalists to contextualise information from press releases and statements to give Pacific audiences a better understanding of Western governments' assistance in the region and the benefits it brings.
4. *Engagement with and assistance to Pacific countries needs to be more closely tailored to the unique relationship and challenges faced in each country.* This report shows a clear difference in public discourse towards China and PIC national governments between Melanesia and Polynesia, but further research is needed to better understand differences at the national level. Subregional analysis does, however, already highlight greater negativity towards the West and towards local government corruption and lack of transparency in Melanesia compared to Polynesia, indicating a priority area for training and support.
5. *PICs, along with Australia and New Zealand, need to build mechanisms to collaborate and share information regarding CCP influence in the information environment and malign activity and online harms promoted by foreign actors (state or non-state).* ASPI has also previously proposed that an Indo-Pacific hybrid threats centre⁵⁹ would help regional governments, businesses and civil society—including those in PICs—to better understand and counter these threats.
6. *The baseline understanding of online sentiment in PICs towards foreign partners should be further developed and used as an indicator and warning system of CCP information operations' effectiveness.* By tracking online sentiment during important events in the Pacific over time, we can better understand whether the CCP's behaviour and activity are changing in intensity or effectiveness across the region. Ongoing tracking can be used to identify particularly effective or ineffective narratives that could sway online opinion or harden negative views. Governments should seek to fund civil society groups to continue with this tracking and analysis.
7. *A locally based Pacific islands fact-checking organisation should be developed to identify and debunk misinformation and disinformation online.* This organisation should incorporate media from across the region and monitor all national Pacific languages, partnering and being supported by social media companies with significant regional market penetration. The Pacific fact-check centre should coordinate closely with Australian Associated Press (AAP) FactCheck, which is currently responsible for fact-checking in the region. Locally based solutions will further improve Pacific independence and resilience.

8. *Pacific countries should develop legislation similar to Australia's News Media Bargaining Code.* The establishment of a code will encourage Meta, which through Facebook is a dominant platform in the region's online demographic, and other social media companies that unequally benefit from the sharing of online news content, to create another source of independent revenue for media organisations in the region. Secure and independent revenue is important for building strong, resilient and independent media in the Pacific. Australia's and New Zealand's existing governance and legal partnerships in the region should help to facilitate and support this endeavour.
9. *Pacific media outlets should aim to provide accurate and consistent 'bylines' for all content published online.* Doing so will increase transparency about the authors of published articles and connections to foreign states or organisations.

Appendix 1: The Pacific islands online information environment

Access to online information varies across the Pacific, where people in more developed cities or urbanised countries have greater access. Social media are the main platforms of online information in most countries due to the ease of access and subsidised data usage on platforms such as Facebook by many telecommunications providers. According to data released by Kepios in February 2022, among the eight largest populations in the Pacific, an average of 45% of the population use social media; the highest percentage of social media users is in Fiji (71.6% of the population), and the lowest percentage is in Papua New Guinea (11.2%).⁶⁰

Facebook dominates followership and activity levels in comparison to other social media platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram. Among the eight largest populations, an average of 92% of social media users use Facebook, in comparison to 11% of users who have Instagram accounts. Facebook accounts for an average of 84.1% of the referrals to third-party websites via clicking or tapping links on social media platforms; it's highest in Kiribati (95.2% of the population) and lowest in Papua New Guinea (80.0%).

Traditional media outlets with a Facebook presence, such as news outlets and radio stations, have significant followership across the region. The largest of those pages in each country range in followership from 2% to more than 39% of the total population.⁶¹ However, those numbers don't perfectly reflect the true access to information, as news from online is often shared among the community offline.

Traditional media outlets are also not the only source of online information on Facebook. Independently operated aggregate news pages have equivalent followership in many countries, as do more informal local discussion pages, which sometimes share local media content in addition to allowing members to post personal opinions.

Posting in many local discussion groups is open to the public. As a result, opinions and media from sources of varying legitimacy are easily shared with little scrutiny. For more than a decade, the region has relied heavily on Facebook to engage in public discourse and fill information gaps.⁶² Misinformation and disinformation spread in this manner remain a global problem. However, the

Pacific region is often considered more vulnerable to the impacts of this information, given Facebook's dominance in the information environment. And, as technology and infrastructure in the region develop, more Pacific islands people will have greater access to online platforms, increasing their exposure to disinformation and misinformation.

Appendix 2: The CCP's united front in the Pacific

Pacific China Friendship Association

There are currently 15 members of the Pacific China Friendship Association (PCFA, 太平洋中国友好协会).⁶³ The PCFA was established in 2016 by the then President and Party Secretary of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC, 中国人民对外友好协会), Li Xiaolin (李小林), as a partner association.⁶⁴ Among the PCFA's official aims are to 'regularly disseminate information between Members regarding regional matters and China' and to 'correct misunderstandings, inaccuracies or misleading information published about any Member or China'.⁶⁵

The CPAFFC is a party-state organ managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in charge of 'unofficial diplomacy', the aim of which is to assist in promoting CCP policy goals via political influence through non-state channels overseas.⁶⁶ The CPAFFC also engages in united front work with organisations directly overseen by the UFWD.⁶⁷ In October 2020, the US Department of State noted in a press statement that the CPAFFC had 'sought to directly and malignly influence state and local leaders to promote the PRC's global agenda'.⁶⁸ The activities of the CPAFFC in the region have included the provision of pandemic-fighting resources, scholarships and capacity building for other 'friendly' organisations.⁶⁹

Previous analysis of China's 'friendship' groups has brought to light many of the ways in which they operate within the country's broader political influence operations, and how they have active links with CCP agencies such as the International Liaison and United Front Work departments, as well as the propaganda apparatus, among others, effectively acting as agents of the party-state.⁷⁰ In the past few years, as noted by Professor Anne-Marie Brady, the PCFA and its associates have been particularly active in promoting activities that are part of China's Belt and Road Initiative.⁷¹

In this report, we have examined how members of these friendship associations are active in publishing a broader range of CCP-aligned content in the online information environment, in addition to contributing to party-state media publications that support the CCP's messaging about the Pacific region. Of the 25 individuals identified as having a current role in China-PIC friendship associations, six were found to be contributing to party-state media output in the Pacific. Their connections to friendship associations and their contributions to party-state media are detailed in Table 2. We also analysed contributions made by the same list of individuals to Pacific-based online media. Most of them made very limited statements in the media, or were reported on during handover ceremonies or donations made by the friendship associations to local groups. Those who did make statements that directly aligned with the CCP's broader objectives, namely Alfred Sasako and Siamelie Latu, were analysed further in dedicated case studies.



A number of members of China–PIC friendship associations have strong political connections in their countries and may have sought to further the CCP’s objectives in the political environment. However, the impact of these associations through those connections hasn’t been assessed in this report.

Table 2: China–PIC friendship associations’ and subsidiary associations’ members and their contributions to party-state media

Name	Association	Role	Contributions
John Haglegam ⁷²	Micronesia–China Friendship Association	President	Quoted
Siamelie Latu ⁷³	Tonga–China Friendship Association	Secretary General	Quoted
Hiria Ottino ⁷⁴	Pacific–China Friendship Association	President	Authored opinion piece, quoted, and interviewed
Bernadette Rounds Ganilau ⁷⁵	Fiji–China Friendship Association	Secretary	Quoted
Alfred Sasako ⁷⁶	Solomon Islands – China Friendship Association	Vice President	Authored opinion piece, quoted, and interviewed
Mildred Sope ⁷⁷	Vanuatu–China Friendship Association	President	Interviewed

Pacific Confucius institutes

Confucius institutes, and their associated members, were also examined as part of this analysis. The institutes have been identified globally as having UFD links.⁷⁸ The institutes and their members weren’t found to be directly contributing to the CCP’s anti-Western narrative tropes aimed at undermining the partnerships between PICs and Australia and the US. However, they did provide positive media coverage for PRC–PIC relations through their establishment and engagement in country.

The opening of the first Confucius Institute in Papua New Guinea University of Technology (Unitech) resulted in positive Pacific media coverage for the Chinese Embassy, with positive quotes from PRC and PNG officials.⁷⁹ Neither of the two local media reports referenced alternative views about the project or previous controversy surrounding Confucius institutes elsewhere. The same event led to positive stories in English-language online reports from party-state media outlet *Xinhua*.⁸⁰ Further positive media coverage has since been generated with press-release-style reports detailing Confucius Institute activities and donations, which provide ample opportunities for the PRC Ambassador to make a statement.⁸¹ The proximity of Confucius institutes can also be expected to shape a more positive tone in local coverage of other China-related topics.⁸²

Increasing PRC involvement and exchanges with PICs will open up diverse channels for the CCP to benefit from positive media coverage. As relationships are built and strengthened with local actors, opportunities for optimistic coverage of PRC–PIC ties will grow and create feedback loops producing further calls for closer ties.

This can be illustrated by an August 2020 Tonga media article penned by Siamelie Latu, which called on the Tongan Government to establish a Confucius Institute.⁸³ Latu’s piece also praised the role of a Chinese partner institution: Liaocheng University in Shandong Province. The university had also hired Latu’s wife as a part-time professor while Latu was serving as the Tongan Ambassador to China.⁸⁴

Latu's article is labelled 'sponsored', without an indication of who paid for it. Of the seven sponsored articles published by the same media in 2020, three were by Latu pushing pro-CCP narratives, and two were from China's Ambassador to Tonga.⁸⁵

Liaocheng University hosts the Centre for Pacific Island Countries, which plays a significant and growing role in developing PRC influence in the Pacific and has cultivated close links with PICs, particularly Tonga.⁸⁶ Reports from the centre of its activities indicate that it has UFWD links. In August 2022, a senior official from Shandong Province Jiu San Society (九三学社) visited the centre accompanied by the deputy head of Liaocheng's UFWD. During his visit, the official gave 'constructive opinions' on the centre's work and was informed about the centre's development as well as the current situation in the PICs, according to a report from the centre.⁸⁷ The Jiu San Society is one of China's legally recognised non-communist political parties under the leadership of the CCP; its core membership is made up of intellectuals in the fields of science and technology.

The role of Pacific Confucius institutes and their associated members has so far been limited in supporting the CCP's objective of undermining Australian and US partnerships with PICs online. However, the connection of the institutes, and connections in the education sector through other UFWD-linked entities, warrant their continued inclusion in any future analysis of CCP influence in the international information environment.



Notes

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CPAFFC	Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries
CPICFMM	China – Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers Meeting
PCFA	Pacific China Friendship Association
PICs	Pacific island countries
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
PRC	People's Republic of China
UFWD	United Front Work Department
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations



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